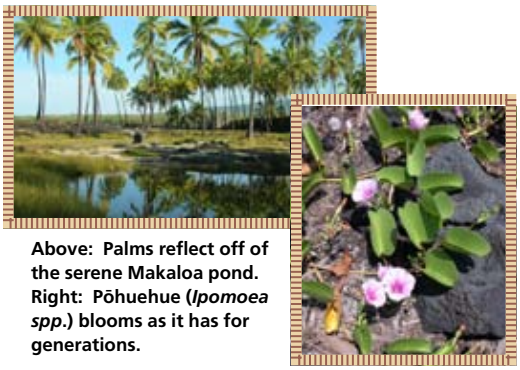
Pu‘uhonua o Hōnaunau NHP — Hawai‘i

The last remaining intact pu‘uhonua, or place of refuge in Hawaii exists in Hōnaunau in the district of South Kona, Island of Hawai‘i. Pu‘uhonua were an integral part of the Hawaiian culture and kapu belief system. An individual who broke kapu (system of religion and law) could be reprieved from punishment of death if he or she could reach a pu‘uhonua. These areas also provided a safe haven for women, children, elderly, and non-combatants in war.

The importance of preserving the pu‘uhonua at Hōnaunau has been recognized for over 100 years. The great wall was partially restored in 1902 and 1912, and the area was recognized as having national significance in 1935. Finally, Pu‘uhonua o Hōnaunau National Historical Park was established in 1961 for “the benefit and inspiration of the people.” The park was erroneously named the “City of Refuge” which was corrected in 1978. On August 30, 2006, an additional 238 acre parcel of adjacent land, Ki‘ilae, was officially acquired by the National Park Service through the diligence of The Trust for Public land, and congressional support. The park now spans the coast along three ahupua‘a, starting at Hōnaunau, through Keokea, and to the southern boundary of Ki‘ilae.

Cultural Resources: Pu‘uhonua o Hōnaunau (original park boundary) was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1966. Twenty-one historical structures are on the NPS List of Classified Structures and include such archaeological features as the Great Wall, Hale o Keawe, and several structures within Ki‘ilae Village. The Great Wall delineates the pu‘uhonua, Hale o Keawe was the mausoleum for chiefs in the area, and Ki‘ilae was the supporting village which is full of archeological features such as house complexes, learning heiau, and fishing shrines.

Natural Resources: Though the park's history of ranching and associated non-native vegetation from that era remains dominant, a few areas that support native species and habitat remain. They are principally the coastal strand, anchialine pools, and cliff areas.



Above: Palms reflect off of the serene Makaloa pond. Right: Pōhuehue (*Ipomoea spp.*) blooms as it has for generations.

In addition, green sea turtles frequently bask on the shores of Keone‘ele cove. And flying the sky above them, Hawaiian hoary bats and shorebirds feed along the coast. Charismatic mini-fauna include anchialine pool shrimp, and possibly the endangered orange-black damselfly. Whales, dolphins, and sharks can be seen offshore from the park.

Twenty loulu palms (*Pritchardia affinis*) were outplanted near the new building and visitor center through collaboration between the park and the Tropical Reforestation & Ecosystems Education Center in 2006. Other endangered plants are maintained as part of a botanical garden, Kīhāpai uka, in a three acre detached parcel through a partnership with the Hawaii State Forestry and Wildlife Arboretum in Hilo.

Inventory and Monitoring Highlights: Inventories of the park's reptiles, shorebirds, anchialine pools, and bats have been completed. I&M documentation of bat presence paved the way for detection research that began in February, 2007. Also, results from the analysis of pond sediments are now available (in draft). This paleoenvironmental study was made possible through a partnership between the park and I&M.

Current Issues in Management: The majority of the park’s acreage is dominated by invasive, non-native vegetation. These invasive species damage archaeological features, out compete native species, and are an inaccurate representation of the historical landscape that the NPS tasked to preserve. Coastal strand and anchialine pool habitats display the highest density of native plants, though only in discrete pockets.

Non-native animals also create management concerns. Goats and pigs have been in the park on numerous occasions, despite fencing efforts around the original 182-acre park boundary. The new Ki‘ilae parcel is not yet fenced and is under threat of damage to cultural and natural resources by feral ungulates. Feral cats and mongoose frequent the picnic area where they can often successfully beg food from humans. Moreover, the royal fishponds are full of non-native, non-culturally appropriate fish. Finally, Coqui frogs have just been reported to be present in the upland garden parcel.

Erosion of cultural resources along the coast continues to be a challenge as subsidence and sea level rise continue, especially during winter high surf events. The balance between protecting the landscape, cultural resources, and natural resource values is challenging. The park has maintained the sandy beach at Keone‘ele cove by importing crushed coral after high surf events. Currently, geotextile cloth anchored with concrete stepping stones has been placed to protect the cultural layer from further erosion while a long-term solution is sought.

Future management plans include fencing the Ki‘ilae parcel and restoration efforts along the coastal strand and the fishponds. More information is needed to define reasonable and attainable resources management goals that will address the big challenges created by non-native species and erosion.

The sun setting behind the pu‘uhonua paints a pink and black picture of times past

Come visit us:

This historical park is located in South Kona on the island of Hawai‘i.
On the web at: http://www.nps.gov/puho/